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Of Priestesses, Princes and Poor Relations: The Dead in the Royal Cemetery of Ur

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Archaeological discoveries of dead individuals, usually in the form of burials, have frequently captured the imaginations of public and professional audiences alike. In addition to the allure of exotic artefacts and seemingly bizarre funeral rites, burials offer rich possibilities for investigating myriad aspects of past social, cultural and even individual life. This discussion focuses on one of the more renowned archaeological excavations of an ancient cemetery, the Royal Cemetery of Ur. Consideration of who was and who was not buried in the cemetery suggests that cemetery burial was the prerogative of those people who were closely attached to 'public' institutions. This leads to a number of observations on Sumerian treatment of the dead and attitudes toward death, as these can be approached from archaeological and textual sources.

One of the most celebrated findings from Sir Leonard Woolley's 12 years of excavations at Ur is the Royal Cemetery. In the five field seasons that he devoted to the Cemetery, Woolley excavated and recorded approximately 2000 graves, spanning the Early Dynastic III, Akkadian, and Post-Akkadian periods (Fig. 1).

Thanks to the numerous popular accounts of his work which Woolley produced (for example, Woolley 1954) as well as more technical reports (Woolley 1934), the Cemetery immediately attracted the attention of a wide audience, including both archaeologists and the general public. Two seemingly unique features of the graves were responsible for capturing this attention: the incredible wealth of some of the burials, including the liberal use of gold, silver, bronze, lapis lazuli, and carnelian in finely worked objects of a distinctively Sumerian style (Figs. 2-4); and the evidence of human sacrifice in a small number of the graves.

The wealth of information from the Royal Cemetery and the care with which Woolley excavated, recorded, and published this material enable us to address almost limitless kinds of questions using the Royal Cemetery. In this article the discussion is confined to two issues: first, I pose the question of who was buried in the Cemetery, and suggest that in order to reach an answer we must also consider who was *not* buried there; and secondly, I consider the ways in which the dead were treated, as such treatment may bear upon Sumerian conceptions of death and the afterlife. To begin, let me set the stage through a brief background sketch.

Background

The Royal Cemetery was in continual use as a cemetery for approximately 500 years, from *c.* 2600 to 2100 BC, a period of time divided archaeologically into Early Dynastic (ED) III, Akkadian, and Post-Akkadian periods. The best-known of the graves - those famed for their wealth and human sacrifices - date to the ED III period (*c.*2600-2350 BC). ED III has been characterized as the classic period of Sumerian city-states. Each city-state comprised one or sometimes a few large urban centres, in which much of the population resided, surrounded by a rural hinterland in which agriculture and pastoralism were the predominant pursuits. The city-states of southern Mesopotamia were mutually interdependent economically, socially, and culturally. Nonetheless, they were politically distinct entities, although individual states frequently attempted to gain control over their neighbours, leading to much

Figure 1. *Woolley's plan of the Royal Cemetery.*

Figure 2. *Headdress of Pu-abi, the principal occupant of Royal Tomb 800, in situ.*

acrimonious rivalry. Ur, as one of these city-states, participated in these rivalries, and like many of the others had its moments of glory and power.

In the subsequent Akkadian period, Sargon of Akkad succeeded in wresting control from the individual city-states and creating a single political entity which has often been referred to as an empire. He and his successors managed to retain some degree of unified political control for approximately a century, despite frequent rebellions by many of the city-states. Finally, this political superstructure fell apart, reverting to a pattern of competitive city-states in the Post-Akkadian period, until southern Mesopotamia was once again drawn into an imperial formation around 2100 BC by the Ur III dynasty.

Although we know something of the fortunes of Ur from the Early Dynastic to the Post-Akkadian period from texts, we have remarkably little additional information about the city from archaeological sources. The reasons for this are straightforward: Ur was occupied for nearly two more millennia, and in most of his work Woolley concentrated on the later periods. In addition, the large-scale building programs undertaken by the rulers of the Ur III dynasty often resulted in the destruction of earlier buildings, thus obliterating many earlier third millennium constructions. We do know that there was a ziggurat at Early Dynastic Ur - a staged mudbrick platform on which sat a temple and around which was a service area, with kitchens and workshops - and that nearby was a thick-walled building with construction and contents suggesting that it was of non-domestic (i.e. 'public') character. Of the contemporary residential areas, however, we have almost no hint.

Who was buried in the Royal Cemetery?

Since the first rich burials were discovered in the 1920s, there has been much speculation about the identities of the people who were buried in the Royal Cemetery. Let us consider some of these proposals.

Among the 2000 graves there are 16 that Woolley

Figure 3. *Stacks of gold, silver and copper vessels in Royal Tomb 800.*

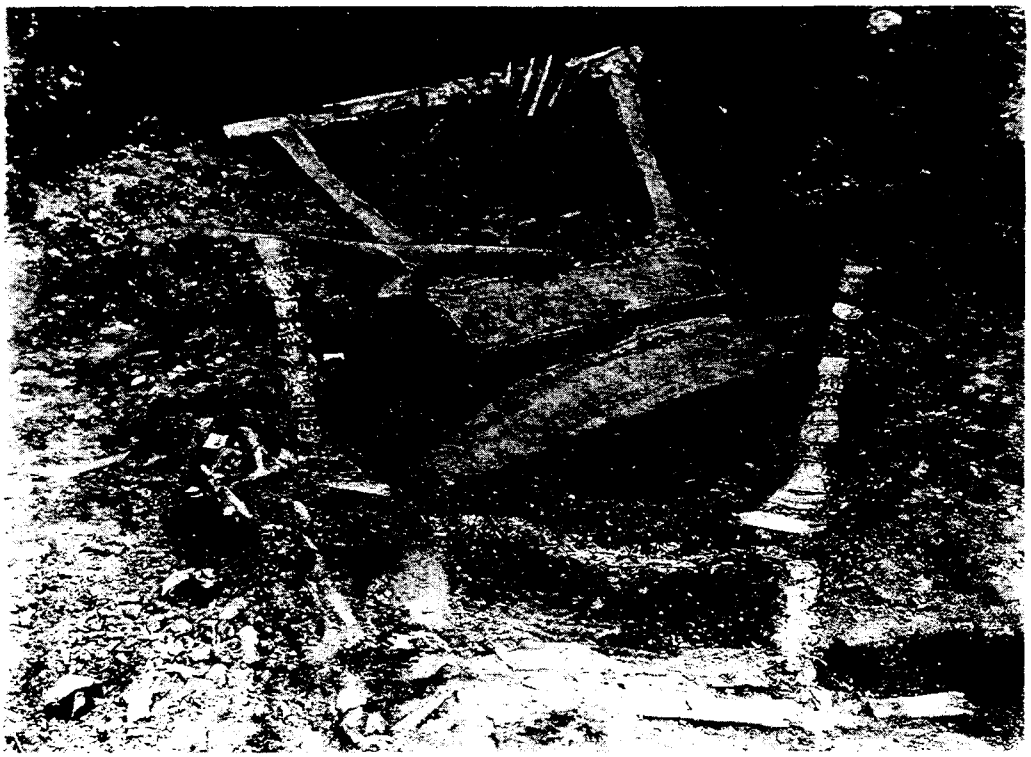

Figure 4. *Two lyres as they were found in Royal Tomb 1237.*

considered to be distinctly different from the rest and which he named the Royal Tombs. These 16 graves, dating to the ED III period, all have built chambers of stone or stone and brick, in contrast to the remaining graves which contain coffins or mat-wrapped burials laid in an earthen pit. All of the Royal Tombs have evidence of 'human sacrifice' - the intentional killing of additional individuals, from four or five to as many as 75, to accompany the principal deceased person to the grave. The 16 Royal Tombs also contained great riches, but as Woolley noted this was also true of some of the other graves that did not have built chambers or human sacrifices.

Woolley (1934) argued that the people who were privileged to be buried with this very distinctive pomp and circumstance were royalty who were accompanied to their death by the members of their courts. The remaining graves, his 'private graves', contained the burials of ordinary people or commoners of varying wealth and social position. He gave several reasons for identifying the tombs as places where royalty were buried. On the one hand, he expected kings and queens to be treated in a distinctively different way from other members of the community (whom he called the 'private citizens' or 'commoners'). More importantly, in several of the tombs he found inscribed artefacts, usually cylinder seals, which mentioned the name of a man or woman followed by the term *lugal*, a Sumerian word translated as 'king', or *nin*, Sumerian for 'queen'. It would seem that we could not ask for more! But unfortunately, none of the artefacts mentioning kings were found in direct association with the body of the principal occupant of the tomb. For example, in Royal Tomb 1054 the principal occupant, seemingly a woman, lay in her chamber at the very base of the grave shaft, while the seal inscribed 'Mes-kalam-dug the king' was found along with two daggers in a wooden box in a chamber built some four metres up the shaft (Fig. 5). There is no compelling reason to think that this seal was the seal of the tomb's principal occupant, and it is perhaps more likely that it was an offering placed in the tomb by someone else. Although in one case (Royal Tomb 800) inscribed seals labelling a person as *nin* were found in direct association with the tomb's principal occupant, *nin* can also refer simply to a high status lady, without necessarily implying that that person was a queen.

Other scholars have suggested that the individuals in the Royal Tombs were high priests and priestesses, with their retinues of attendants. Some have extended this argument to propose that these people were involved in the so-called sacred marriage ceremony, to ensure fertility and the annual cycle (cited in Woolley 1934, 38-40). However, Woolley argued quite convincingly that this latter possibility was unlikely. As for priests and priestesses, there is neither direct support for the identification nor any compelling evidence to counter the argument.

My interpretation of the people buried in the Royal Cemetery hinges on the recognition that many inhabitants of Ur were not buried in the Cemetery. Woolley reported approximately 2000 graves from the Cemetery, most of which contained a single individual. He further noted that he had encountered perhaps as many as 4000 more graves which were so badly disturbed that he did not record them (Woolley 1934, 16). The Cemetery may, then, originally have contained as many as 6000 people. At a size of approximately 50 hectares, we assume that third millennium Ur included at the very minimum 5000 inhabitants at any time. Regardless of the figures we use for average life expectancy, it is obvious that far more than 6000 people must have lived and died at Ur during the 500 years that the Cemetery was in use. If this were not in itself sufficiently convincing, we must also note that of the approximately 2000 burials recorded by Woolley, fewer than 50 are children. Wherever children were buried, it was not, with rare exceptions, in the Cemetery.[1]

It would of course be desirable to supplement this argument by considering in greater detail the age and sex structure of the burial population represented in the Royal Cemetery. Sadly, this is not possible, since Woolley neither recorded this information systematically nor kept the skeletons for future study. Only a very few skeletons were sent to a medical doctor for examination (see the report in Woolley 1934, 400-10); otherwise Woolley confined himself to noting those bodies that were clearly sub-adult, i.e. children. The gender of at least some individuals can be tentatively established from aspects of their mortuary treatment, principally the accompanying grave goods (Pollock 1991), with the proviso that socioculturally ascribed gender may not always correspond directly to biological sex. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Pollock 1991), the gender of people of lesser status does not seem to have been clearly marked in death, or at least not in a fashion that has survived archaeologically or is at present recognizable to us.

To return to the question of the identities of the dead buried in the Royal Cemetery, I suggest that they were individuals who were attached in some way and to some degree to the 'public' institutions of the temple or palace. On the basis of contemporary written sources, such people could range from kings and queens, high

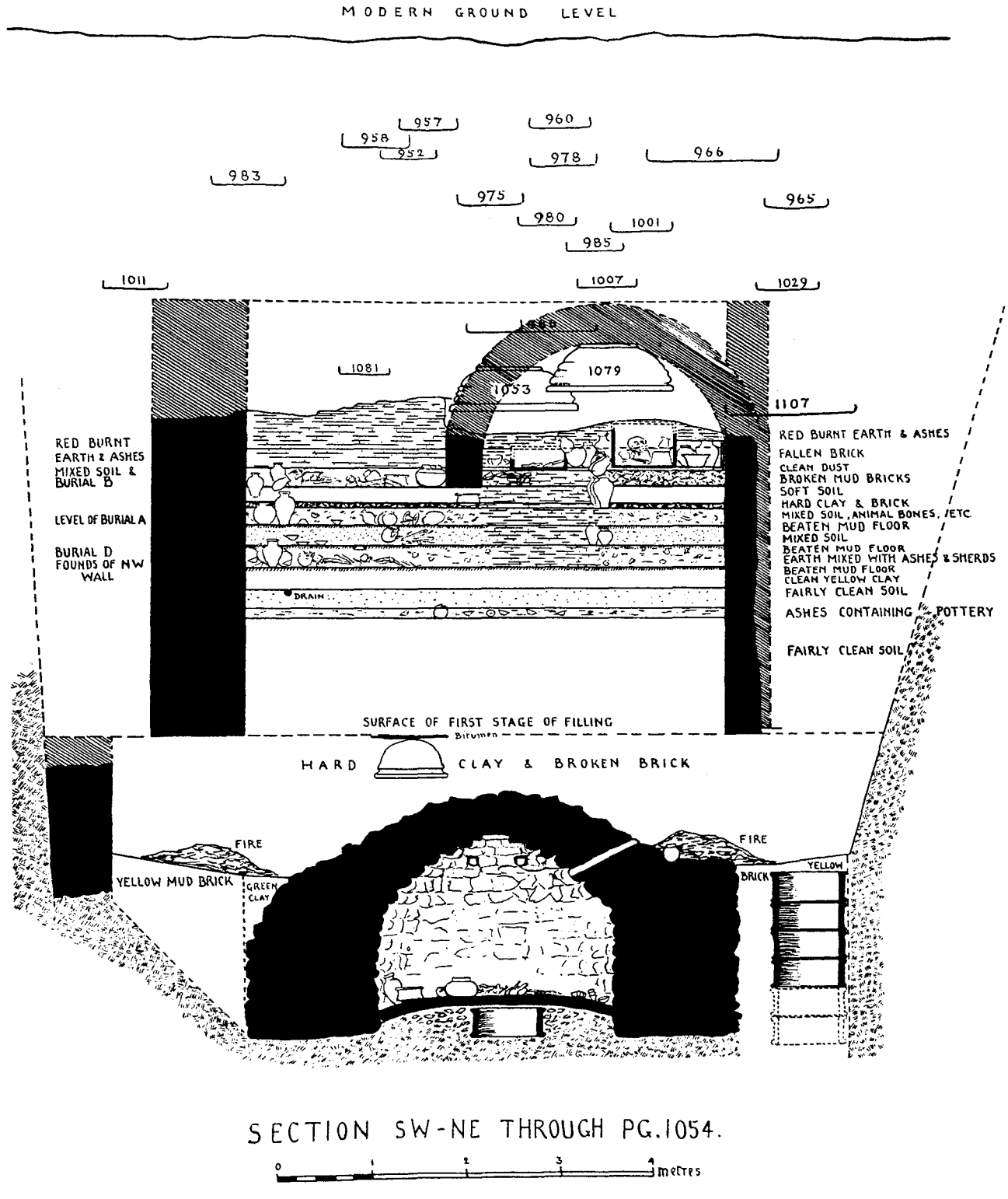

Figure 5. *Section through Royal Tomb 1054. The burial of the principal occupant was located in the chamber at the base of the grave; the box containing the daggers and the inscribed seal were found in the chamber built high up in the shaft.*

priests and priestesses, to menial labourers who 'belonged' to these institutions and received subsistence rations in return for their labour. Between these extremes was a wide range of people who were partially attached to institutions and received rations according to the type and amounts of labour they provided (Gelb 1979).

In distinction to those people attached to institutions were individuals whose primary affiliation remained with their kin groups. There are indications from a range of sources that during the third millennium BC the power and independence of kin groups was being progressively eroded by the palace and temple institutions. One of the most obvious forms that this took was the accumulation of large tracts of land by officials, thereby rendering many families landless (Gelb 1979; Zagarell 1986).

The interpretation put forward here is that the principal burials in the Royal Tombs are of people from the most elite social positions, whether these were kings and queens, high priests and priestesses, or other high status positions of which we are unaware. Indeed, the considerable variability among the Royal Tombs - in construction, plan, number and types of 'sacrificial victims', and accompanying grave goods (Figs. 6 & 7) - may be partly attributable to differences in the roles that these people played in life. Furthermore, this interpretation proposes that the individuals buried in the 'private graves' of the Cemetery include the range of other people attached to temple and palace institutions. Again, these burials exhibit a tremendous diversity, from those with no grave goods, a few clay pots or a string of beads, to those that contain a wealth of objects and rival the Royal Tombs in richness (for example, the 'grave of Meskalamdug', PG 755). Such variation, which clearly indicates that the Cemetery was not exclusively used by the wealthy occupants of the city, can be attributed to the diverse make-up of the personnel attached to 'public' institutions.

What of the remaining people, those who did not receive burial in the Royal Cemetery? At least some of these people may have been buried within their houses. The reason for suggesting within-house burial is that such a practice is attested at a number of contemporary sites (Abu Salabikh: Martin *et al.* 1985; Postgate 1980; Khafajah: Delougaz *et al.* 1967; Fara: Martin 1988). At no Early Dynastic site is there unequivocal evidence of burial both in cemeteries and within houses, but neither are there sufficient burials at any site to account for the number of people who must have lived and died there (Steele 1990). Burial beneath the floor of the house implies close and immediate association with the house, a symbolic bond of some importance if these people were indeed asserting that their primary ties were still to their kin groups rather than to public institutions. This may also be where many of the children were buried who died before reaching adulthood.

Of course, burial in cemeteries and within houses does not exhaust the possible methods of disposing of the dead. Off-site cemeteries, disposal of bodies in the river, or simply exposing them to the elements could all have been practised, and some of these methods would leave no archaeological traces. Such practices must have been common in the preceding millennium, since only a handful of burials have been found dating to the Uruk period (*c.*3900-3100 BC). Only by ascertaining what proportion and what parts of the population are represented in on-site cemeteries and house burials can we hope to work out how many and what sort of people were disposed of in other fashions (cf. Morris 1987).

Treatment of the dead and Sumerian conceptions of the Afterlife

The burials in the Royal Cemetery exhibit tremendous variability in terms of the kinds of goods placed in the graves to accompany the dead person and, to a lesser extent, in the treatment and placement of the body. Many of these differences are attributable to the gender, wealth, and social standing of the deceased (see, among others, Woolley 1934; Moorey 1977; Pollock 1983, 1991). While there is enormous scope for exploring the relationship between the treatment of the dead and their gender, wealth, and social position, I wish in the present discussion to steer a rather different course. My concern here is how the treatment of the dead related to Sumerian beliefs about death and life after death. As we shall see, Sumerian literary sources relating to these subjects - of which there are only a limited number - offer insights that are of great help in interpreting the archaeological evidence. But at the same time, archaeology offers glimpses of customs and beliefs for which the textual sources in no way prepare us.

The Sumerians envisioned the Underworld, the place to which mortals descended at their death, as a dismal place. According to 'The Epic of Gilgamesh', it was a place

> where dirt is their drink, their food is of clay, where, like a bird, they wear garments of feathers, and light cannot be seen, they dwell in the dark, and upon the door and bolt lies dust. (Kovacs 1989, 65: Tablet VII lines 179-82)

An individual's only hope of a decent existence in the Underworld seems to have been to bring their own

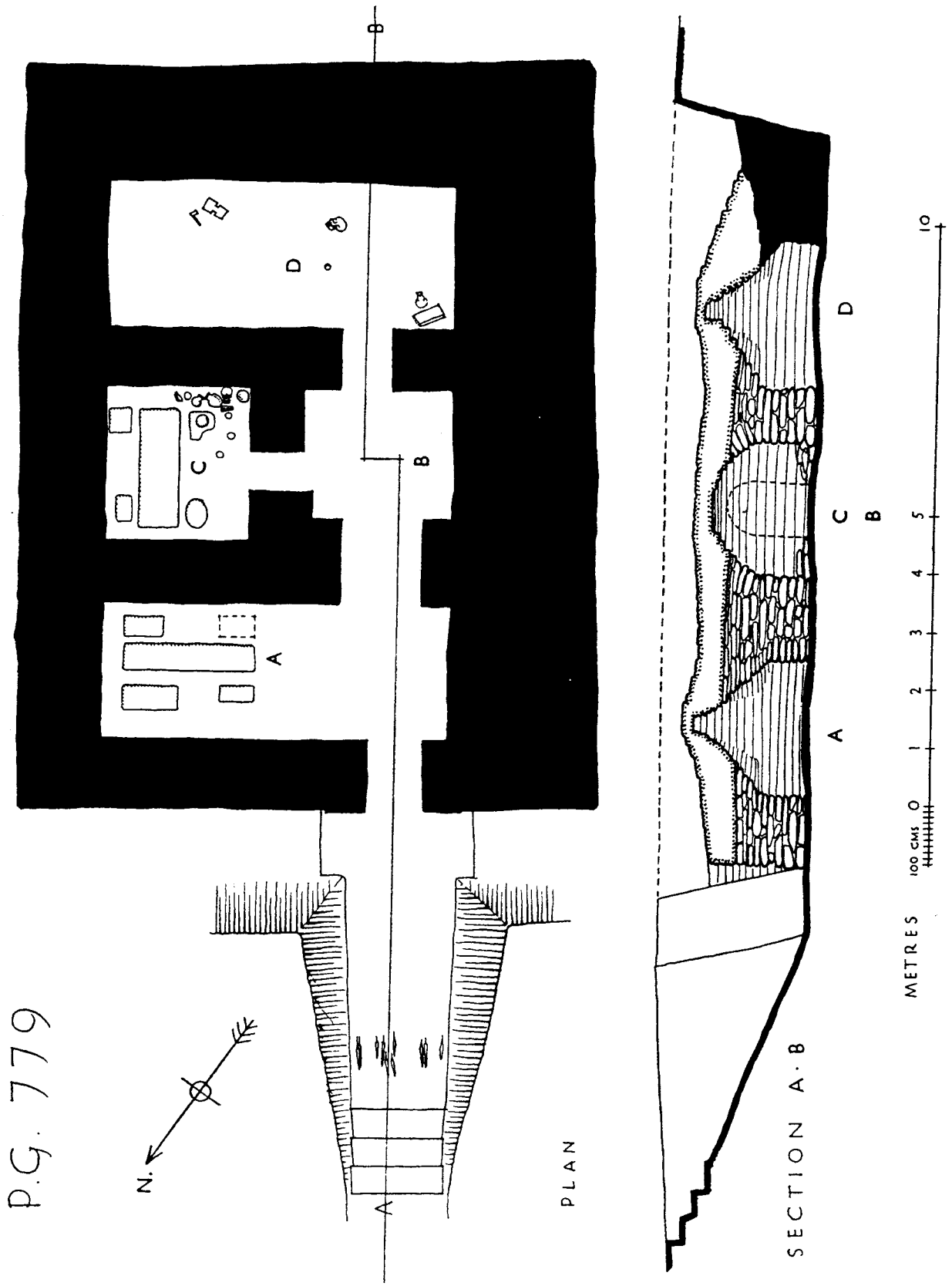

Figure 6. *Plan and section of Royal Tomb 779.*

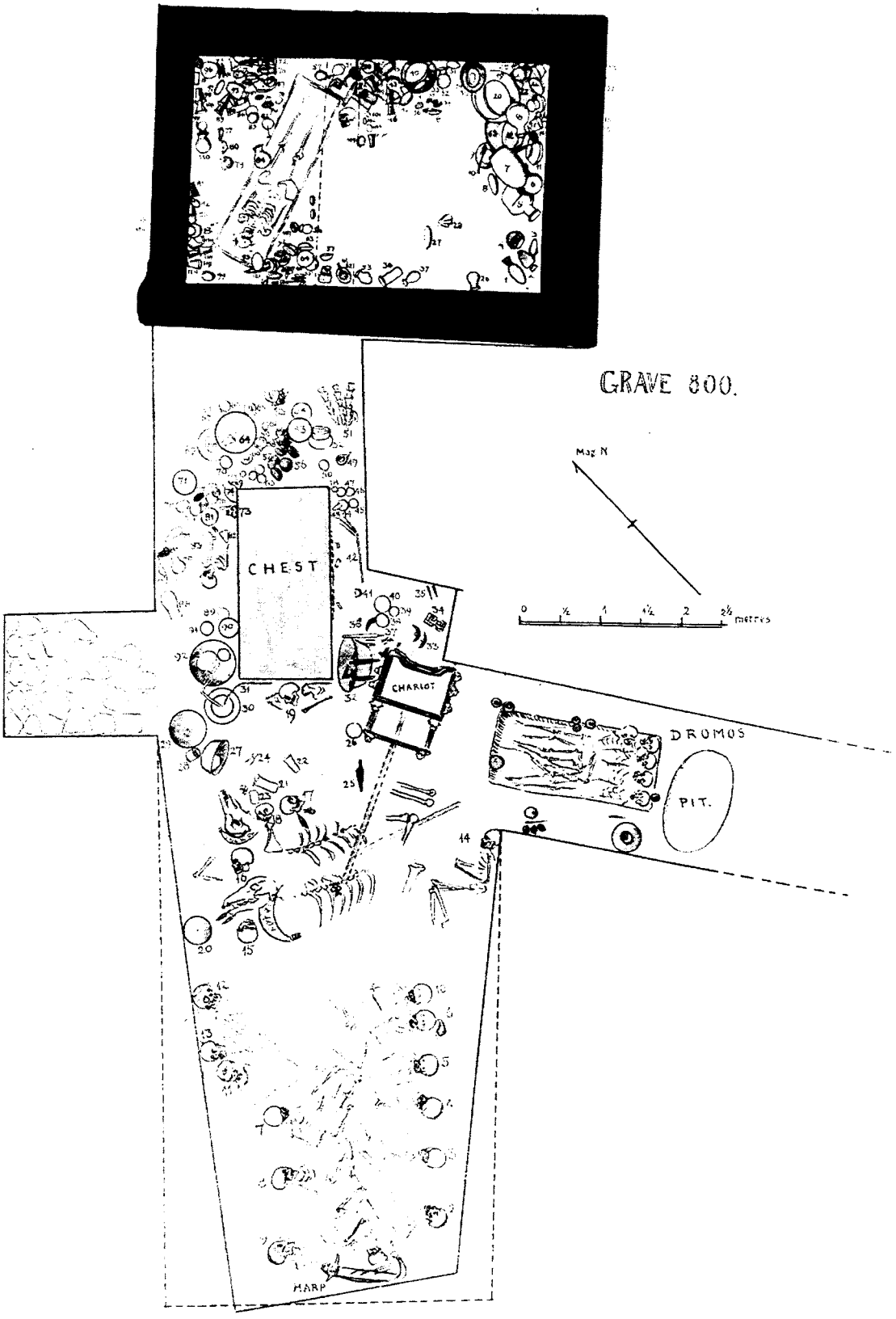

Figure 7. *Plan of Royal Tomb 800.*

provisions, as well as gifts with which to placate or bribe the powers-that-be of the Underworld (see also Moorey 1977). From this, we can begin to understand one reason why nearly every individual was buried with vessels of some sort, whether of clay, stone, or metal: they served as containers for food and drink. In some cases, remains of food - fish or mammal bones, grain, legumes, date stones - were found in vessels in the graves (Woolley 1934, 144; Ellison *et al.* 1978).

Both in death and in life, the Sumerians viewed nakedness as synonymous with powerlessness. In iconographic representations, captives are shown naked whereas their captors are always dressed (for example on the Standard of Ur: Woolley 1934, pl. 92). In a literary text entitled 'Inanna's Descent to the Nether World' (Kramer 1950; 1951), the goddess Inanna makes a journey to the Nether World in an attempt to extract favours from her sister the queen. To prepare for the trip, she dresses in her finest clothes and jewels:

> The shugurra, the crown of the plain, she put upon her head,
> Locks (of hair) she fixed upon her forehead,
> The measuring rod (and) line of lapis lazuli she gripped in her hand,
> Small lapis lazuli stones she tied about her neck,
> Twin nunuz-stones she fastened to her breast,
> A gold ring she put about her hand,
> The breast plate 'Man, come, come!' she bound about her breast,
> With the pala-garment, the garment of ladyship, she covered her body,
> The ointment 'He (the man) shall come, he shall come', she daubed on her eyes.
>
> (Kramer 1951, 2: lines 17-25)

As she passes through the seven gates that lead through the Nether World, she is systematically stripped of her clothes and her jewellery. Finally, she is brought before the queen, naked and also powerless.

This metaphor which contrasts nakedness and powerlessness with being dressed and bejewelled and thus powerful can help us to understand many of the objects that accompanied burials as part of 'dress' in the broadest sense. Most artefacts in the graves fall within the domains of dress, jewellery, and symbols of position and power. For example, we find that both women and men were equipped with bead necklaces, earrings of gold, silver, or copper, and metal pins apparently used to fasten clothing. Females of importance were buried with elaborate headdresses of gold or silver ribbon, wreaths of gold or silver leaves, rings suspended on strings of lapis and carnelian beads, and ornamental spikes (called 'combs' by Woolley) of gold or silver with inlaid rosettes that were worn at the back of the head (Fig. 8). Males of importance also had distinctive headgear, in this case usually a string of three large elongated beads attached to gold or silver chains which were worn around the forehead. Males also frequently wore a dagger or knife at the waist and might carry an axe in the hand (Fig. 9; Pollock 1983).

While this picture is necessarily oversimplified and homogenized, it serves to illustrate the kinds of artefacts that were commonly buried with the deceased. Some of these, such as components of the elaborate headdresses, have never or only rarely been found in contemporary burials elsewhere. I suggest that some of these objects may have been perquisites of institutional attachment and cemetery burial, specifically designed to coerce people gently into a relationship of greater dependency on these institutions.

Just as enlightening are the kinds of things that are *not* placed with the dead. Royal Cemetery graves, whether rich or poor, almost never contain objects related to mundane, economic activities such as tools used in agricultural or pastoral tasks, artisans' equipment, or artefacts associated with textile manufacture. Yet these were the activities that formed the backbone of the Sumerian economy. It seems that ordinary work, a person's manual occupation, was not appropriate or relevant at death; what was important was their ritual or political position.

One of the most famed aspects of the Royal Cemetery is its evidence for the practice of what Woolley called human sacrifice. This involved the apparently deliberate killing of a number of individuals to accompany the principal occupant of each Royal Tomb to the grave. The deliberateness of the killing - whether coerced or 'voluntary' - is argued for by the large number of such individuals in several of the tombs (for example, 63 in Royal Tomb 789; 28 in Royal Tomb 800; 75 in Royal Tomb 1237), which makes it highly unlikely that all of these people had happened to die simultaneously. Nor, in the absence of any evidence to suggest either preservation of corpses on the model of Egypt or secondary burial, is it likely that bodies of people who had died earlier were 'saved' until the death of a paramount figure.

Neither burial evidence from other sites nor texts offer us comparable practices or an explanation for them. It is possible that the practice was confined to a relatively short period of time, early in ED III (Nissen 1966; Pollock 1985), and to only one city, Ur, although we cannot rule out the possibility that similar tombs at other sites have simply escaped archaeological discovery. It would seem that the practice is best

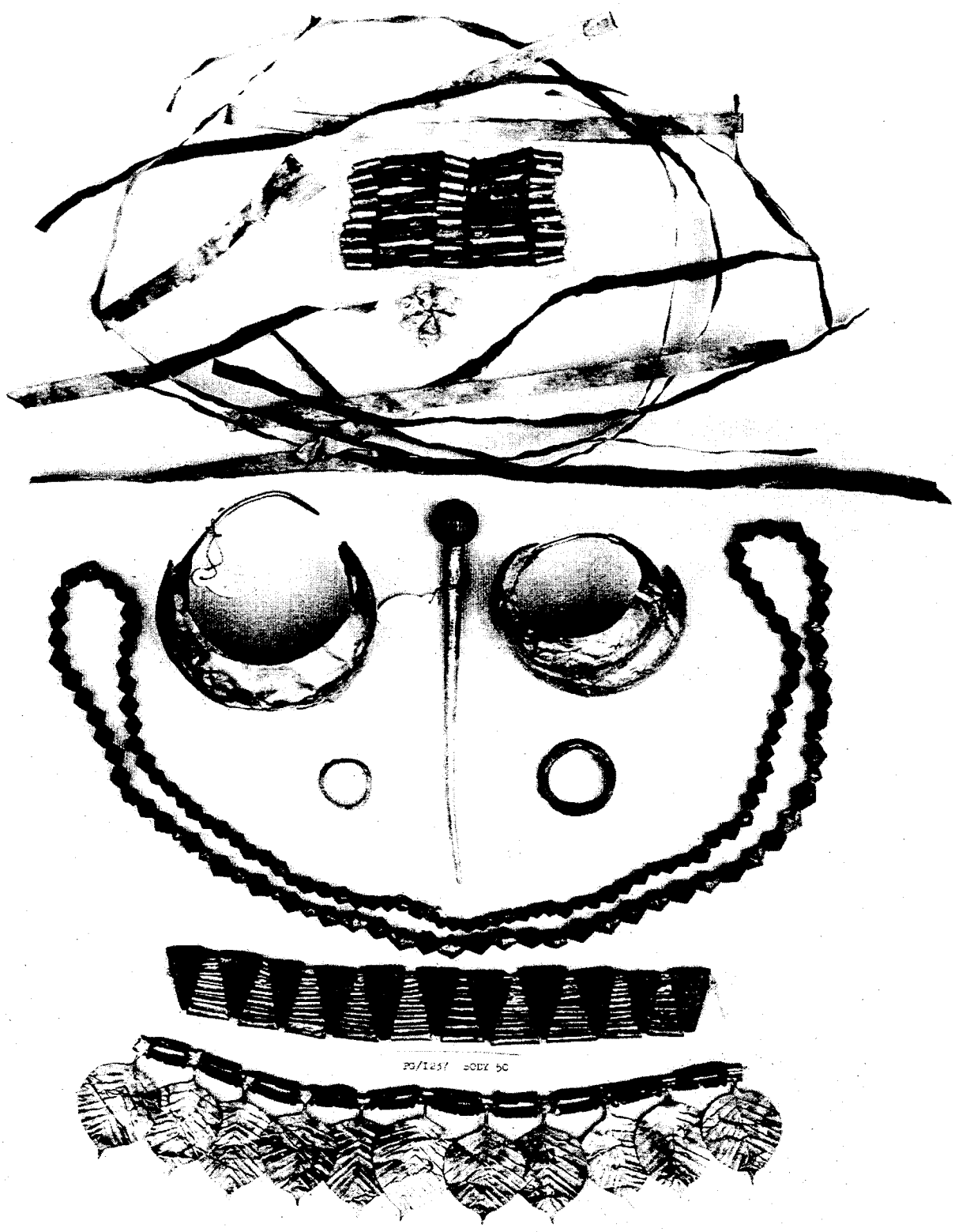

Figure 8. *Jewellery found on the body of one of the many female subsidiary burials in Royal Tomb 1237. Among other items were a gold leaf wreath, gold ribbons, large gold earrings, necklaces and a pin.*

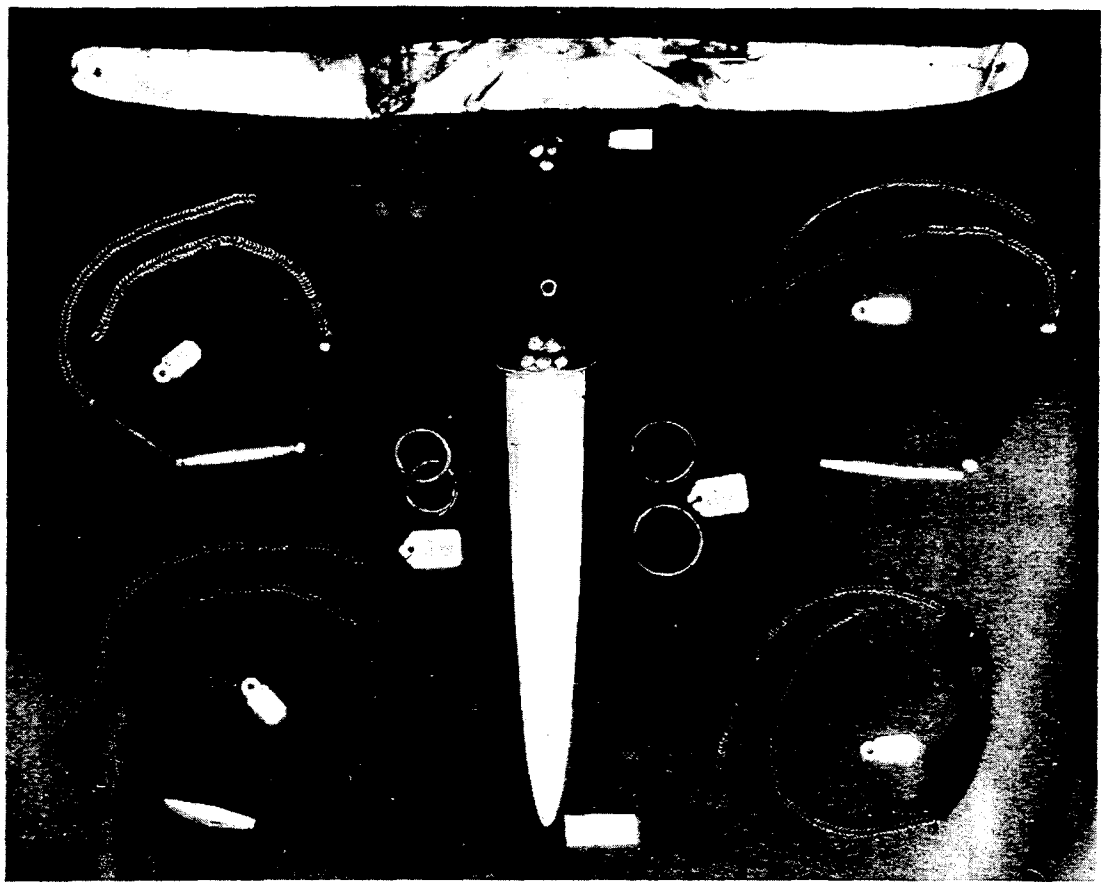

Figure 9. *Objects from Royal Tomb 1618, mainly associated with the principal occupant, including four sets of distinctive headgear of large beads and gold chains, and a dagger.*

understood as a short-lived and extreme form of display of the power of certain individuals - in their capacity as high-ranking members of public institutions - over the lives of others. The idea that the subordinates buried in these tombs were viewed in some respects as merely another variety of the grave goods with which the tombs were liberally endowed has already been suggested by Woolley himself (1934, 38). Indeed, this practice might be a further indication of the lengths to which the leaders of the competing, power-greedy institutions of the temple and palace were willing to go in displaying to themselves, to each other and to the rest of the populace their ability to control their subjects.

As Woolley clearly described, the Royal Cemetery was located in a garbage dump. This is hardly the place where we would expect people to be buried, especially people whose burial involved much pomp and circumstance, not to mention wealth. Nor, most probably, was this simply an abandoned dump; rubbish continued to be thrown there at least shortly after the digging of graves, if not exactly contemporary with them.[2] The texts that we have do not offer us any clues as to the meaning of this practice. But attitudes to garbage - perhaps particular kinds of garbage - and/or attitudes to death in Sumerian times must clearly have been significantly different from ours!

Another phenomenon for which the texts do not specifically prepare us and which runs counter to our culturally-bound assumptions about treatment of the dead is grave disturbance. In the Royal Cemetery, and in all other contemporary cemeteries and house burials, a large proportion of the burials were disturbed in some way in antiquity. This usually seems to have involved removal of some of the objects placed in the grave, and so has been termed by archaeologists grave looting or robbing. In some cases the disturbance appears to have occurred when an earlier grave was encountered in the digging of a later one, while in others it was apparently more deliberate (Woolley 1934, 16-19). In the course of the disturbance, undesired objects (for example, clay pots) and even bodies were often tossed aside. In some cases, all or parts of bodies

are completely missing and were perhaps removed with their jewellery or other objects still on them. While the fact of the disturbance and removal of objects seems undeniable, the connotations of this behavior are open to question. We can begin by questioning how easy it would be to covertly rob large graves located within - and perhaps quite *centrally* within - the city.[3] If this is not in itself sufficiently unlikely, the phenomenon of grave-disturbance in houses makes the practice even more problematic. In at least some cases, for example Grave 234 at Abu Salabikh (Matthews & Postgate 1987; Steele 1990), a person was interred below the floor of a house and the grave subsequently 'robbed' with no apparent cessation in the occupation of the house. If, as seems reasonable, people were buried below the houses in which they and their families lived, why rob the grave of one's own kin?

I cannot pretend to have a definitive answer to this issue of grave disturbance. However, it may be useful to rephrase the question entirely and begin with the assumption that this was not robbing or looting in the sense that we think of it at all. Instead, the objects placed with the dead may have been there on loan, to help the individuals negotiate their entrance to the Underworld. After some period of time, objects could be retrieved by the living and returned to other uses, probably including inheritance by the living. This is not to say that 'borrowing' back from the dead was considered ideal; rather the practice may have been accepted even though not particularly desirable. Indeed, it is quite easy to imagine how such a practice could have been abused, especially since we hear from the text entitled 'The Reforms of Uruinimgina' (Steible 1982) that priests had been abusing their prerogatives by demanding exorbitant pay for their services at funerals.

Concluding remarks

A comprehensive interpretation of the Royal Cemetery is well beyond the scope of a short essay such as this and requires attention to many more attributes of the deceased, their treatment, and Sumerian society more generally than have been touched upon here. What I have tried to do is to show some of the ways in which the Royal Cemetery burials can be understood as expressions of and responses to normative attitudes concerning death. At the same time, the burials formed part of the power struggles among various sectors of Sumerian society, struggles which themselves doubtless contributed to the shaping of normative attitudes. Thus, for example, a cultural dictum that to wield power one must be appropriately dressed makes understandable many of the objects with which the Royal Cemetery dead were provided; it also indicates a means by which people could be manipulated through their cooption by powerful institutions which, among other things, offered to provision them with certain desired materials at critical junctures in life - such as death.

The Royal Cemetery has served as a source of many of our ideas about early Sumerian civilization, at the same time as it has been seen as a unique discovery. This somewhat contradictory attitude highlights some important points. On the one hand, there are notable similarities between the treatment of the dead in the Royal Cemetery and at other contemporary sites, for example in the positioning and treatment of the body and in the categories of objects that accompany the deceased. Yet, while recognising these similarities (which no doubt reflect the participation of Ur in the larger social and cultural sphere of Sumer and Akkad), we must not fail to recognize the unique characteristics of the Cemetery. Moorey (1977, 39) has commented with insight that some of the features that mark the Cemetery as distinct, most notably characteristics of the Royal Tomb burials, may be aspects of a local cult, perhaps specific to Nanna, the moon god and patron deity of Ur. That the cult of Nanna was an important tradition at Ur has been strongly argued by Winter (1987) in a consideration of the art historical evidence. Pursuing these arguments offers us a possible avenue toward investigating the particular, local differences between city-states, rather than viewing all of Sumer as one homogenous whole.

Notes

1. It is, of course, possible that children figured among the graves that were not recorded by Woolley. Comparisons with other ED sites, however, suggest that children are routinely under-represented in excavated burial populations (e.g. Kish: Mackay 1925; Abu Salabikh: Steele 1990).
2. Woolley believed that a significant period of time elapsed between the use of the area for a cemetery and the next episode of rubbish disposal (Woolley 1934, 218-27). It is not clear that this must be so, however; it is unfortunate that Woolley's reporting of the details and stratigraphy of the rubbish heaps is not all that it might be. He was also influenced by his own feelings about the relationship between garbage and burial: '... it is a moral probability that such desecration of the old graveyard as is involved in the use of it as a rubbish-dump only took place

after a decent interval since the date of the last interment ...' (Woolley 1934, 220).

3. The location of the Royal Cemetery relative to the rest of the city is problematic. Woolley took pains to point out that the Cemetery's apparent location in immediate proximity to the much later Temenos area need not have any direct relationship to its position in the Early Dynastic town (Woolley 1934, 13-14). However, Woolley's assumption - that so long as the site of the Cemetery contained no buildings and was used as a rubbish dump, it must have lain outside the city proper - does not seem justified. Other indications suggest that Ur may have reached its full size of some 50 ha at this time (Wright 1981, 327), in which case the Royal Cemetery would have been well within the city limits and quite probably near its centre.

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Comments

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A decade ago the editor of a set of conference papers on Death in Mesopotamia remarked that 'the fact that the Gilgamesh Epic was mentioned frequently, but the royal burials at Ur very seldom, reminds us of the many riddles that still remain unsolved' (Alster 1980). Since then, Susan Pollock has thoroughly re-analysed the Royal Cemetery at Ur, perceptively redefining the primary questions it raises; but the riddles predictably endure since it remains unique. Although it would be unwise to assume that Woolley's excavations revealed the whole of this cemetery, subsequent work elsewhere in Sumer certainly suggests, as Pollock argues, that the excavation of contemporary houses at Ur might well yield domestic burials, particularly of children, as was the case there later.

We are still far from explaining the variety of Sumerian urban burial customs. When graves are in houses, it is by no means always clear whether the house (or that part of it) was or was not inhabited at the time. When graves concentrate in cemeteries, often over many generations, it is not yet evident whether they were intramural or extramural and, if the former, whether location was haphazard or controlled by proximity to the central city shrines (as arguably at Kish-Hursagkalama and Ur) and whether admission to such a burial place was a matter of institutional affiliation or status, as Pollock argues, or of piety. Heroes, martyrs and saints, and the eternal felicity conferred by burial as close as possible to them, may be older phenomena in Iraq than is currently assumed.

The relative ease with which excavated grave groups may be ranked by constructing histograms of wealth scores has combined with a modern preoccupation with power and status to emphasisze socio-political stratification at the expense of mortuary differentials less readily quantified or less accurately recorded by excavators. How are we to test whether burial practices in Sumer, or elsewhere, do or do not correlate more closely with aspects of ideology than with social structures?

Pollock rightly invokes the evidence of texts and iconography to elucidate Sumerian eschatology, but what little there is serves only to demonstrate that local 'theologies' were as prevalent as city-states and no more coherent. Even if we accept with her that nudity was synonymous with powerlessness in life, it does not follow that it was so in cult or in death. Libation scenes illustrate the ritual nudity of priests in the presence of the deity. Representations of nude or partially nude women (?goddesses) suggest that Inanna's disrobing as she passes through the Underworld has a more subtle cultic interpretation than Pollock allows, as may the rich attire (and presence) of attendants in the 'royal' graves. Indeed, Sumerian grave equipment may have had more to do with arriving in the Underworld, with the rites of passage, than with lifestyles - past or hoped for.

Controversial specifics apart, Pollock has wisely concentrated on two fundamental points not always sufficiently recognized in recent mortuary archaeology: that no single cemetery may be assumed to provide a representative sample of the local population; and

that marked variations in the treatment of the dead are as much to be expected within as between cultures.

From Thorkild Jacobsen, Bradford, New Hampshire

Dr Pollock's paper raises interesting and relevant questions about the Royal Cemetery at Ur and offers stimulating suggestions for answering them. A few comments based on textual evidence may be added.

Dr Pollock points out that the cemetery could have accommodated only a fraction of Ur's population after death and suggests that it was reserved for burial of Temple and Court personnel only. Other inhabitants of Ur may have been buried in their houses or in off-site cemeteries, exposed to the elements, or disposed of in rivers. Of these possibilities, that of exposure can probably be discounted given the Sumerians' intense abhorrence for having bodies lie unburied, even those of enemies. The others are all viable and one might add that of drowning or getting lost in the marshes.

Of these various possibilities, the one most likely to have accounted for large numbers of bodies would seem to be that of additional off-site cemeteries, as there is no necessity to assume that cemeteries were restricted on a basis of institution or class. Of interest for cemetery burial are UruKAgina's Reform Texts from the end of ED III. They show that tradition had established standard fees for funerary services as follows:

> The beer of a corpse going to the cemetery was seven jars, the loaves four hundred and twenty. One hundred and twenty quarts of ha-zi barley, one cloth, one headrest, one bed and one chair did the 'Shark-guise' (officiant) take away. Sixty quarts did the 'expert' take away.

The beer and bread of the corpse are clearly to go into the grave. Other texts suggest that the furniture mentioned was apparently used in the final rites. The next following section in the decrees begins 'After a man had gone into Enki's reeds', that is, was lost in the marshes. It lists the same costs as those for burial in the cemetery, which seems uncalled for with no corpse to rest on the bed or use the chair. UruKAgina, accordingly, cancelled all demands for furniture in this case.

Relevant for seeing the Royal Tombs in context is a passage in the tale 'The Death of Gilgamesh' published by Kramer. I think it is possible to get a little further than did Kramer in his very careful and cautious pioneer translation. With slight emendation of the reading of two damaged signs I should translate it as follows:

> When his beloved spouses, his beloved children, his beloved first wife and (his) young concubine, his musician and cupbearer (!?), his beloved barber, his be[longings (?)] his be[loved] servants (!?) in attendance in the palace, his beloved ... things had been laid down in their places in the palace founded on stone in the midst of Uruk, did Gilgamesh, son of Ninsuna, check out their greeting gifts to Ereshkigal.

As will be seen - and was noted already by Kramer - there are here definite points of contact with the actual findings in the Royal Tombs at Ur. There too the deceased was followed in death by the deceased's household including musicians, as testified to by the harps, and ordinary servants such as guards and grooms. An unusual feature is the use of stone besides clay in their construction. The designation of Gilgamesh's tomb as 'The palace founded on stone' may suggest the use of the same odd technique there. Possibly it had ritual implications. A difference is that in the Gilgamesh passage his family follows him in death; such seems not to have been the case at Ur. Also, while some of the objects found in the Royal Tombs may have constituted greeting gifts, there is no way to demonstrate this.

The rather fuller picture given by the Gilgamesh passage helps greatly to clarify how the Sumerians in ED III saw the death and burial of a king or queen. In death the king moved with his family and household to another city-state - that of Ereshkigal - to settle there. Accordingly he brought greeting gifts, standard procedure for calling on people of importance and essential for establishing proper relations with the dignitaries of the Nether World in which he expects to be accorded a position consonant with his rank. Gilgamesh was made a judge in the Nether World, and so was Ur-Nammu.

Lastly, I must admit that explaining the household following their master in death as evidence of 'competing, power-greedy institutions of the temple and the palace ... displaying to themselves, each other and the rest of the populace their ability to control their subjects' strikes me as anachronous. The Suttee is a better comparison

From Hans J. Nissen, Seminar für Vorderasiatische Altertumskunde, Berlin

The sensational discovery of the Royal Tombs at Ur occurred only a few years after the even more sensational find of Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt with its tremendous wealth of precious objects. Both cases displayed a host of objects of both artistic and material value which had accompanied the dead on

their journey to the other world. Both cases also stood witness to elaborate ceremonies and rituals at the time of burial.

In Egypt, however, the layout of the tomb, its furniture and rituals can without any problem be tied into a larger picture of religious and ritual practices the information for which comes from an overwhelming number of both written and pictorial records. Furthermore, this tomb is only one of a large number of both contemporary examples and others across the entire range of ancient Egyptian history.

The Royal Tombs of Ur, on the other hand, stand alone. There are few other examples of built tomb-chambers - certainly no contemporary ones - and in general there are not many examples of graves. But they are isolated also in the sense that we possess neither written nor pictorial representations which would inform us about the religious background. Any information about religious beliefs and rituals has to be deduced from the tombs themselves, the finds, and their archaeological contexts.

Archaeology indeed has developed a set of concepts for such interpretation. Thus the presence of food containers accompanying the dead leaves no doubt that part of the religious belief was that there was something after death to which everyone had to travel and for which travel provisions were needed.

More on the social level is the common interpretation that persons with great wealth in their graves had also been the most affluent people in life. For anything else, however, we would need a more detailed frame of reference which could only be provided by parallel finds.

It is here that we cannot stress too much the basic problem of Mesopotamian archaeology: despite over 100 years of intensive research we still have little more than unrelated pieces of evidence which in most cases form a coherent picture only in our scientifically controlled imagination. Because we have so little at hand we are constantly faced with the danger that we argue from negative evidence - which is no evidence. How do we know that the site of the Royal Cemetery was a special place when less than 10% of it has been excavated? How do we know that this site was restricted to burials of people institutionally related to the occupants of the Royal Tombs, when we know that it had been used for centuries before as a burial ground without any evidence for the burial of exceptionally influential people? How do we know that this kind of burial and wealth of grave goods were restricted to Ur when few other sites of this period have been touched? (In fact, we do have evidence for a similarly rich grave with signs of human sacrifice from the Y-cemetery at Kish.) And finally, how do we know that the rich personal ornaments and furniture were handed over to people in order to tie them to the institution providing them, and that they were recycled?

I do not want to be misunderstood: the questions raised by Pollock are long overdue, and some of the answers she proposes are not only thought-provoking but are probably in the right direction; yet, for the time-being, everything remains as open as before.

From Elizabeth C. Stone, Department of Anthropology, State University of New York at Stony Brook

Susan Pollock presents a nice analysis which places the 'royal' graves from the Early Dynastic period at Ur within the broader pattern of Mesopotamian burial customs. Her suggestion that the population of the cemetery as a whole might be restricted to those tied to the public institutions of both palace and temple is well taken. Diakonoff (1971, 19) has long since argued that Mesopotamian society was divided into temple/palace dependants and more 'private' groups, and there exists a growing body of evidence which would suggest that these relationships might have been mirrored at death. At Mashkan-shapir - admittedly dating to a significantly later period - survey data suggests the presence of a cemetery, located in the vicinity of the temple and administrative districts, as well as other burials associated with private houses. This is exactly the kind of double burial system suggested by Pollock.

What I miss in Pollock's analysis is an evaluation of the peculiar circumstances that are special to the latter part of the Early Dynastic period. Not only does Wright (1981, 327) estimate that the size - and presumably therefore the population - of Ur had doubled over little more than a century or two, but this was the time to which we would assign the innovation of kingship in Mesopotamia. It must therefore be seen as a period of experimentation with a new social and political order, and the peculiarities of the Royal Cemetery should be viewed within such a context. It is impossible at this time to know what might have been the models of kingship used by the fledgling Mesopotamian monarchs, but it is not impossible that some may have turned to Egypt, the only contemporary civilization in the region, for models to symbolize royal power. I find it preferable to see the Royal Tombs as one of many experiments in representation of a new political reality, rather than to interpret Mesopotamian burial ritual as one where the accompaniment of worldly goods was believed to be of much service. I

have always interpreted the myth of Inanna's Descent to the Nether World, not as an indication that the accompaniment of worldly goods will ease the afterlife, but rather that worldly wealth is of no avail, that all the dead arrive naked and are turned into corpses which are hung from a stake (Kramer 1969, 55). I do not doubt that the few food offerings and personal ornaments which normally accompany the dead in Mesopotamia might be believed to ease the passage to the Nether World, but the overwhelming weight of the evidence suggests that no Mesopotamian carried any optimistic view of life hereafter. Thus I would tend to see the Royal Tombs as an aberration within Mesopotamian belief systems, a situation where the new-found and personalized power of kings and priests sought reflection in their treatment after death. In the process, they elaborated an already existing burial ritual, as Pollock has shown so nicely, yet through this elaboration came into conflict with existing ideology regarding the efficacy of worldly goods after death. These conflicts are very much to be expected during experimental periods in the development of a civilization. Tombs of kings accompanied by retainers have also been found in the period of the earliest kings in Egypt, China and Mesoamerica, but in all three cases the human cost of the death of a monarch was reduced in subsequent generations.

In sum, Pollock's presentation is extremely clear and thought-provoking as she has delimited the framework of the issues at hand. Any disagreement over the interpretation of the material speaks more of the complexity of the issue, and is a tribute to the lucidity of her analysis.

From Piotr Steinkeller, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, Harvard University

Pollock's article is a welcome re-examination of several key issues pertaining to the Royal Cemetery at Ur, most importantly, the question as to who were the people buried there. She argues plausibly - and quite convincingly, in my view - that the occupants of the most extravagantly equipped burials stemmed from the upper echelon of Ur society, comprising the heads of 'big organizations' and their immediate dependants, whereas the individuals buried in the 'poorer' graves were the lower ranking members of the same organizations. This explanation not only accounts for the economic disparity within a single agglomeration of burials, but it is also in agreement with what we know about the nature of southern Babylonian society in later Early Dynastic times: the absence of clearly defined class divisions (of caste variety), with social distinctions being based more on politico-administrative ranking and wealth than on birth and inherited privilege.

Pollock makes an important point that the occupants of the Royal Cemetery could have represented only a fraction of the dead of Ur, and suggests that the 'missing' dead were buried in private houses or were disposed of informally, either by being dumped into the river or exposed to the elements. She is unquestionably right that such alternative forms of dead-disposal must have been widely practised in ancient Mesopotamia. In fact, the dumping of carcasses into the river appears to have been a routine way of handling the dead in ancient Mesoptamia, as is indicated by the Sumerian composition 'Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living'. Musing over his mortality, Gilgamesh observes matter-of-factly: 'I leaned over the city-wall (and) saw human bodies floating down the river. And I, too, will be treated so! This is the way things are!' (Kramer 1947, 8-10, 25-27). Clearly, human carcasses floating down the Euphrates must have been a common sight in Early Dynastic Uruk! However, Pollock's suggestion that the burials in houses were reserved for those individuals whose primary ties were to their kinship groups rather than to 'big organizations' seems to me forced and highly unlikely. Given the characteristically indifferent attitude that the ancient Mesopotamians showed toward their dead, and the question of afterlife more generally, it would appear that, under normal conditions, the choice of the form of burial was dictated by little more than expediency and economic considerations.

Pollock also re-opens the question of human sacrifice at the Royal Cemetery. Since no examples of such sacrifices are known from any other Mesopotamian site, Early Dynastic or otherwise, one must agree with her that this practice represented a 'short lived and extreme form of display of certain individuals' power'. To expand on this conclusion, human sacrifice at Ur should be seen as but the most extreme manifestation of the later ED burial customs. Like the human sacrifices, the fabulously rich burials of the RoyalCemetery are a feature that was unique to Early Dynastic III times. Since these practices seem to be at odds with the Mesopotamian views of the afterlife, they were very likely a short-lived fad, which had possibly been inspired by a foreign example. It is apparently this 'alien' aspect of the Early Dynastic burial practices, rather than the simple question of economics, that accounts for their eventual discontinuation.

While Ur and Kish are the only sites that yielded material evidence of such burials, their existence at

other Early Dynastic sites is proved by the contemporaneous textual data. A late Pre-Sargonic tablet from Adab records the furnishings that were deposited in the graves of the chief-administrator of Kesh and his wife (Foxvog 1980; re-edited by Gelb *et al.* 1991, 91-103). These objects, which included a mule-drawn chariot or wagon, beds, chairs, weapons, garments, and assorted jewellery, match very closely the assemblages unearthed at the cemeteries of Ur and Kish (Steinkeller 1980). As I suggested elsewhere, a similar listing of funerary objects may be recorded in a tablet from Lagash, though, admittedly, the interpretation of those objects as interment goods is not beyond doubt (Steinkeller 1980; 1990, 21-9). It is interesting to note that the latter listing includes a slave-woman, which, if my explanation of this text is correct, would constitute the only cuneiform reference to human sacrifice at funeral in ancient Mesopotamia.

Reply from Susan Pollock

I would like to thank the individuals who took the time to comment for their helpful and thought-provoking remarks. In the short space available, I can respond to only a few of the points raised.

Nissen questions the adequacy of the archaeological data to address some of the issues discussed in the paper. While his cautions are well-taken, I would argue that we will never have 'enough' data. This issue, for me, is not so much the quantity and quality of our data - though these surely play very important roles; rather, the challenge is one of phrasing new questions, proposing interpretations that can be partially evaluated with available data, and critically re-evaluating the assumptions and theoretical bases of our approaches. I would be the first to agree that I can only partially and very tentatively propose answers to the questions I pose in this article.

Some of Moorey's remarks concerningthe roles of piety, affiliation, status, ideology and social structure in the realm of mortuary practices are closely related to questions of what we can hope to 'know' from archaeological data. But his comments also raise questions about the use of categories. I fully agree that piety and proximity to the graves of heroes and martyrs may have played an important role in the placement of graves, a point which I do not adequately emphasize. But what I am less willing to accept is the notion that piety or beliefs about the afterlife are somehow independent from ideology, or ideology from political and social relations. It seems to me that our understanding of Sumerian practices of disposal of the dead and attitudes toward death will be most enriched by considering how all of these relationships structure and are structured by each other, rather than by trying to treat them as distinct realms.

Stone remarks that the late Early Dynastic was a time of experimentation with new political and social orders and that the Royal Cemetery must be understood within this context. This is a critical point that I did not sufficiently stress. I might add that her comments also raise questions about how the Royal Cemetery relates to contemporary burial practices elsewhere in Mesopotamia, an issue I was only able to touch on tangentially in this article.

Specific aspects of Sumerian views of the afterlife, as implied by textual sources, are cited by Jacobsen, Steinkeller and Stone. In reading their comments, I am struck by the differences in their interpretation of the written sources. On the one hand, Jacobsen points to the continuity of households in the afterlife and the importance of bringing gifts and provisions appropriate to the status of the household head, while on the other hand Steinkeller and Stone stress the cavalier attitudes of the Sumerians to their dead and the futility of worldly goods for improving the miserable conditions in the afterlife. These differences in interpretation serve as a reminder that textual sources must be analyzed as carefully as archaeological evidence, bearing in mind that texts, too, are fragmentary, partial, and 'biased' accounts of the past.

Furthermore, these textual citations also suggest that what we tend to distinguish as 'religious' cannot neatly be separated from political or ideological concerns. (A similar point is made by Stone.) Finally, I question whether it is justifiable to interpret Sumerian attitudes toward the dead as indifference, as Steinkeller suggests, or whether this is rather a question of different practices appearing to us in our cultural context in that way. Although bodies of some, even many, people may have been disposed of with an eye to expediency, hundreds of excavated Early Dynastic graves reveal that considerable effort was expended on the disposal of many of the dead.

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